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Merton and Kentucky: Call for Remembrances

Victor A. Kramer

This issue of *The Kentucky Review* contains an edited interview of Robert Giroux, part of a series of interviews conducted by me and transcribed for archival purposes as part of a Thomas Merton Oral History. That project, conducted between 1980 and 1985, sought to gather recollections concerning Merton from diverse sources. The most accessible and natural place to start such a project was within monasteries—in conversations with Merton's fellow monks. By seeking interviews from persons who knew him quite well, it was possible to obtain commentary, facts, and anecdotes about Merton, as well as information about a contemplative way of life often not commented upon in detail elsewhere. The edited transcriptions of the interviews should prove of value for future researchers who seek to understand Merton and his milieu.¹ Many of the persons interviewed provided insights not just about Merton, the monk and writer, but also about his monastery and the monastic life which helped to form him.

The Thomas Merton oral history project, however, has not been limited to Merton's fellow monks. Mr. Giroux, Walker Percy², and Robert Lax all consented to interviews, and their valuable comments make it clear that additional interviews with Merton's literary associates and friends are needed. It has become increasingly evident that Thomas Merton was an extremely complex figure; it is therefore crucial that as much source material about him as possible should be gathered while persons who were close to him are alive. This applies particularly to the persons who reside within close proximity of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton's monastic home, a place where he received many visitors and from which he was able, occasionally, to visit others. An example of a frequent visitor to the Abbey is James Laughlin, one of Merton's editors, who was interviewed in 1985. Many other persons in the Bardstown-Lexington-Louisville area knew Merton and, therefore, might be sought out and interviewed.

Many of Merton's friends and artist associates still reside in Kentucky. It is, therefore, my hope that an extension of the initial

oral history project will include some of these persons. Such a "Merton and Kentucky" oral history project could include religious, literary, and artistic friends.

It can be documented from the biographies that Merton had associations with many persons in Louisville, Lexington, Bardstown, and, moreover, in nearby religious houses. Interviews with such persons would most likely yield interesting facts. Continuation of systematic research on Father Louis/Thomas Merton demands that we gain as much information as possible about his contacts with other persons beyond the monastery. It will eventually be possible, I imagine, for someone to write a detailed study about Merton and Kentucky. Now is the time to gather as much information as possible about this subject.

The Merton Oral History Project will, if extended, remain an archival project. Since the interviews already completed were conducted as an archival project, there are no immediate plans for publication of the transcripts. Each interview, transcribed and edited, will be annotated by the person interviewed and approved by that person for inclusion in any printed version. Control of quotations from the transcripts will remain with the person interviewed.

It is my hope that the existence of the first set of nineteen edited transcripts, and the publication of the Giroux interview in this issue of *The Kentucky Review*, might stimulate other scholars to pursue similar work. It seems reasonable to assume that there are many stories about Merton and his Kentucky associations which are waiting to be recorded. A considerable number of interviews should be conducted during the next several years.

Should other persons share this interest in oral history interviews about Father Louis/Thomas Merton, it might be possible to coordinate efforts in the future. Communications addressed to me with respect to the project will be welcomed at the Department of English, Georgia State University, University Plaza, Atlanta, Georgia 30303.

NOTES

¹The first set of edited transcripts (nineteen separate interviews, 464 double-spaced pages) has been completed and is now on deposit at selected archives and Merton research centers, including the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, The Merton Center at Columbia University in New York City, The Abbey of Gethsemani, and the Special Collections Department of Georgia State University in Atlanta. The persons interviewed whose transcripts have been included in the first volume are the following: Dom Flavian Burns, Dom Augustine Moore, Brother Patrick Hart, Mr. Charles Skeehan, Brother Paul Quenon, Brother Michael Casagram, Father Chrysogonus Waddell, Brother Frederic Collins, Mr. Robert Lax, Father Paul Bourne, Father Joachim Tierney, Father Matthew Kelty, Father Phillip Richert, Mr. Robert Giroux, Dr. Walker Percy, Father Regis Tomkins, Dom John Eudes Bamberger, Brother Brian Kerns, and Brother John Baptist Schmidt. The monks reside at the Abbey of Gethsemani and other monasteries which are daughterhouses of Gethsemani.

²The interview with Walker Percy was generously included by him in the recent volume *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Oxford, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1985).